The Memoirs of Constable Thomas Courtney

Thomas Courtney

Supplement to:

The Origins of the Molly Maguires in Ireland,

by Eugene Dunphy, 2025

The Memoirs of Constable Thomas Courtney

Born in 1826, in County Armagh, Thomas Courtney had but a scant memory of his early boyhood, but had a vivid recollection of the devastating storm that gripped Ireland in early January 1839, subsequently known as *Oíche na Gaoithe Móire* ('Night of the Big Wind'). He recalled with fondness receiving a rudimentary but formative education at a local hedge school, under the tutelage of Master Kelly. Joining the Irish Constabulary (later the Royal Irish Constabulary) at the age of eighteen, Courtney spent just a few months at the police training depot at the Phoenix Park, Dublin. His first posting, as 'Constable 5912', was to a small police barracks at Hillstreet, about five miles south of Carrick-on-Shannon. This area was the epicentre of Molly Maguireism in counties Leitrim and Roscommon, so it is little wonder that a substantial portion of Courtney's memoirs concern his encounters with 'the Mollies'. Indeed, Courtney's wife had been a victim of a Molly Maguire attack.

In 1850 he was posted to another police barracks (unnamed), where he remained for eleven years. In 1861 he was seconded to Cloone, County Leitrim, yet another hub of Molly Maguire activity, before being posted to Farnaght, eight miles south of Cloone. Having served for thirty-one years as a constable and sergeant, he was discharged from servive on medical grounds in 1875, after which he and his family settled in Belfast, Courtney securing a job with the Belfast Town Council. In 1894 the sixty-eight-year-old veteran retired from the Council, and at the age of eighty, submitted the first of a series of articles to the *Belfast Telegraph*. Evidently, the editor of 'the Tele' had visited Courtney at his home at 6 Athol Street, Belfast: 'Time has traced its furrows upon his visage', said the editor, 'and a career subjected to many rigours and hardships has shorn a vigorous frame of much of its strength, but he is still in full possession of his physical faculties, and his mind is as keen and vigorous as it ever was'.

Courtney's first contribution was published on 17 November 1906, on page eight of the *Belfast Weekly Telegraph,* under the heading 'Belfast Veteran. Fifty Years Public Service'. I have taken the liberty of adding headings to his accounts and, where necessary, added introductory remarks to his recollections, as well as footnotes; the comments in square brackets are also mine.

Thomas Courtney: early years

I was born on the 1st January 1826, in the neighbourhood of Newtownhamilton, County Armagh, and of the first ten years of my life I know little or nothing, but I have a perfectly clear recollection of the principal events of the last seventy years. The great storm of January 6 1839, I well remember. I have seen a good many storms since that time, but they were mere breezes in comparison. The storm of '39 left woods, if unsheltered, just as one may see a field of oats lying flat after a downpour of rain. Hay, oats, roofs of houses, and even stacks of turf were swept through the country.

It may be interesting to know the facilities there existed for an education. They were very limited. I got a little in what was known as a 'hedge school', although there was not a hedge within half mile of the unpretending mansion, which was cut out of the front of a big ditch. It had two 'windows'. One was the door and the other the chimney. It could not boast of furniture as there was neither table, form, nor chair (save Master Kelly's), which, if it existed now, would be in a museum. Every scholar formed a class in himself, providing his own book according to fancy or finances, and each scholar rehearsed his lesson at the top pitch of his voice. When all voices were united, they formed a Babel. To describe Master Kelly would be tedious and unprofitable. He boarded with his scholars in rotation, and a good deal depended on the treatment he received from the parents of his pupils. No warrior was ever more elated returning after a complete victory than I when escorting the master to my father's house. He had one short leg, and the other only about half even its length, but he carried what he called his 'wooden horse' (crutch). I recollect a good many famous characters, all of whom have long passed away. Father Mathew, the great temperance reformer, and Dan O'Connell were very prominent characters in the early forties, and there were others of less note. Among them was Mick Doran, one of [Lord Horatio] Nelson's crew, who died in my father's house. He said he was over 100 years of age, and his only regret was that he had to die alone after seeing so many fall around him in battle with Nelson.

Posting to Hillstreet

Not liking hard work and bad keep, I became a candidate for the constabulary in 1844, just seven years after their formation by Act of Parliament, and was called to join the

Depot in the same year. The force at that time numbered only a little over 5,000 all told, and Colonel Sir Duncan McGregor was at that time Inspector-General of the Force.[1] After a few months preliminary training, I was one of 40 recruits sent for duty to County Roscommon, which was at that time in a fearfully disturbed state, practically the entire population being organised and banded together in an illegal society known as 'Molly Maguires', whose object was to turn up stock farms, take arms from any persons disobeying their behests: in short, to rule the country according their own ideas. With such a party, the police were not favourites. On arriving at Kilashee [County Longford], no conveyance could be got to remove our boxes to Roscommon, and the officer was compelled to requisition by force the necessary conveyances, the police becoming drivers. Such was the state of anarchy and disorder, that the police often met these men by night, and were very well pleased to be allowed to pass on without interference. Jurors dare not find a verdict of conviction, and all Molly Maguires were acquitted regardless of the clearest evidence. Such a state of affairs could not exist, and at the summer Assizes of 1845, the petty jury was composed of gentlemen drawn from the grand jury panel, with the result that at one assizes no less than twenty-seven were transported on the day they received sentence. I will never forget the real Irish *caoine* that was sent up around the strong escort of police and military who surrounded the convicts.[2]

Faction fights took place at almost every assemblage, whether fair, wake or wedding, or even at the place of worship. Poltroons, no matter how much divided in faction or politics, all were quite agreed in stoning or beating the police when they got a chance.[3] The police were obliged to attend one place of worship, fully armed for their own safety and protection. I got into a conflict with the 'Mollies' on the night of 2 February, 1846, in the townland of Ardleckna.[4] We stole out of the barrack singly, with arms etc. concealed (a watch was always kept on the barrack), and after crossing the country a long distance, we got to a road. Our party consisted of five sub-constables and an old constable (the present sergeants were all constables at that time, and the present constables were only sub-constables). We knew the Mollies were out, for we heard their shooting, and in a few minutes we found ourselves within about thirty yards of a party which we subsequently ascertained to consist of eighty or one hundred. Knowing that we would be fired on by them if we interfered with them, we lay as flat as possible on the road. When challenged by our senior sub-constable (the

old constable had lost his speech) we got two shots from them. Whether by bullet, slug, or gravel off the road, I got cut across the right shin bone. The mark I yet carry, and will as long as I carry the leg. Young as I then was, it was a kind of attention I did not appreciate, and I jumped to my feet and let them have the contents of my carbine, which was one ball, a ball cut into four slugs, and a heavy lead stopper. They got as a volley from the police; five balls, nine slugs, and four stoppers. They came very leisurely, but they left very hurriedly. Our old constable found his speech as soon as all had fled, and would not allow us to do anything but get to barracks. It turned out to be right, even if not to our satisfaction. Had the strength of the force of police been known, not one of us would have lived to get home. Only one arrest was made a few days after, and that was by a young fellow who was my daily companion. His thigh bone was shattered, and the ball passed through the flesh of the other thigh. It was fully ascertained afterwards that five were killed and eight wounded. I cannot forget next morning when the old constable told me to draw the cartridge out of his carbine. I found there were two cartridges in it. When I told him so, he had quite forgotten it. I said to him, 'Why did you not fire one of them at the Mollies?' He gave me a look that would sour cream and said, 'Damn your soul, you oaf. How could I fire one without firing the two?' I told him I could not tell him, but I thought it would have been charitable to let the Mollies get the smell of his powder, and not to be so selfish as he was. He told me he would give me a good 'Paddy Blake' (glass of whiskey) if I did not tell any person about it. I did not, and got my Paddy Blake.

If the police were not favourites before fighting the Mollies, they were doubly obnoxious afterwards, so much so that the Inspector-General intimated to them that, for their own safety, all were to be transferred to other distant stations or counties. The entire police party, the constable excepted, got up a protest to the effect that if they were changed from the station they would resign the force. They were permitted to remain in the station, but told by the Inspector-General that they did so at their own risk, and he would not be responsible for their safety.

Famine in Roscommon

In a couple or three years' time afterwards, famine laid the country nearly waste. Almost the entire of those Mollies, who were the terror of the country, had gone to the

silent grave and what remained, instead of searching houses for arms, were searching them for food. I have seen a great many reports of the famine of 1846-7-8-9, but I have seen none which would I would consider quite accurate. I have seen none from the pen of any who passed through the ordeal, as I have done. On the morning of 6 August 1846, when the police were getting home a little after daylight (I being one of the party), we were enveloped in thick fog that we could see but a short distance around; the atmosphere was very heavy, with a most disagreeable odour, and on getting into the barracks, all were quickly asleep. On awaking in the evening and looking out, it was seen that a splendid field of potatoes near the barracks were all lying flat and the stalks quite dark and withered, just the same as they would be after a keen frost.[5] Heretofore we could have had potatoes for any money we might think proper to give, but in few days a sound or good potato could not be had for any amount of money. All were gone, quite rotten in the ground. The Connaught people at that time depended entirely on the potato crop: very little grain was sown, or in fact, any other crop cultivated. In a very short time famine set in, and those who had no stock or means of support began to die. The coroner took the different police stations in turn to hold inquests, which averaged from twelve to eighteen or upwards at each sitting. Finally, it was only exceptionally sudden deaths that were at all reported, and the police were instructed not to report any case where foul treatment was not suspected. Coffins got entirely out of use, the corpse being generally rolled in a bulrush mat, if covered at all, and in many cases a grave was made within a few perches of where the individual died. I have myself had to set fire to houses where families had died and were without persons to bury them, so as to consume the corrupted remains. When public works were started, parties were told off for [ordered to conduct] the duties of interments. In those cases, in the vicinity of workhouses or towns, a trench or pit was sank, the remains carried in a kind of covered box resembling a hand-barrow with a slip bottom, which opened on drawing a bolt, allowing the remains to drop into the pit, or general grave, which was covered over when sufficiently filled.[6] Quakers, the Society of Friends, were the first to render aid to the starving. They sent to the most destitute localities grants of Indian [corn], rye, barley, pea, bean, or any other meals to be had. Those grants had always to be escorted from station to station by police, and guarded by police if stored in any place in transit. In ’47 the Government started a system of public works. No doubt the intention was good, but the Act was a failure. Starving creatures were so long kept

from relief before arrangements could be made that at least one half died whilst waiting to be relieved, and many were so worn and emaciated that they were found dead beside the work they were engaged at.

Assassination of Rev. John Lloyd

Courtney inadvertently refers to Rev. John Lloyd as 'Owen Lloyd'; Rev. John Lloyd was killed by a party of Mollies on Sunday, 27 November 1847, near Lissavilla, County Roscommon:

> Time would fail, as well as space, to give even a brief outline of the state of affairs. I will mention a couple of cases of assassination. The worst case I have come across was that of Rev. Owen [John] Lloyd. He was actually killed because he was too charitable, an enigma I will explain later on. Mr. Lloyd was rector the parish of Aughrim, near Elphin, Co. Roscommon, and resided at Smith Hill. He was very wealthy, and his house was kept by an old maiden sister, who also possessed a good deal of cash. They both took a deep interest in supporting the poor and in addition to every other private charity, they got an old brewery on their land as a shelter for the poor, where they got bedding and other necessaries, and filled their house to overflowing, to the number of between four and five hundred, all of whom they supported at their own private expense. It may be mentioned that they had not one of his hearers, or of their own religion under their charge. On Sunday, after officiating at his church, and on his way home, in a lonely part of the road in the townland of Lissavilla, he was met by two men, one of whom caught the horse by the bridle. Mr. Lloyd asked was anything wrong with the horse, and was answered in the negative. 'Then why did you stop the horse?' 'You must die', was the answer. 'I must die! What have I ever done that I must die?' 'You have done no harm but good; but for the benefit of the country it is necessary that you die'. 'Can you not have mercy on me?' 'No'. 'Then may the Lord have mercy on me,' he said, and bared his breast. 'Now, fire away.' The hired assassin, a man named [Thomas] Donoghoe, from the Four Mile House, near Roscommon, would not shoot him, but his comrade took the gun and put a ball through his breast, killing him instantly. He was then driven home, lying dead in his old gig [carriage], by a boy who he kept for charity. All this came out in the evidence afterwards. On the way home, his pauper house had to be passed, and the

screams and maledictions of the unfortunate creatures who were left to starve was most frightful, and nearly all of those creatures died afterwards of hunger.

A lengthened account of how the murderers were discovered, although interesting, would be too tedious. Suffice to say that on the police visiting the scene, one of them, Sub-Constable [Patrick] Fitzgibbon, picked up a bit of 'colfing' of the gun,[7] which proved to be a portion of an old I.O.U. that passed between Mr. Lloyd and a person named [Owen] Byrne. This led to the arrest of a number of persons of that name, along with others. A general investigation took place, which lasted nearly a month. The police took the precaution to keep prisoners separated, so that they could not communicate with each other, and they become suspicious that each was trying to save himself. At last the bubble burst, and everything in connection with the murder came to light. The result was that three were sentenced to death, viz., Donoghoe, the hired assassin; Byrne, who employed and paid him two pounds for doing the business; and another Byrne [Martin, Owen's brother], who accompanied the assassin. One of the Byrnes [Martin] died of fever before the day of execution. The other two were hanged in front of Roscommon Jail. Another proof of the mysterious workings of an all-seeing and just God came to light in connection with the same case, which cannot pass over in silence. Along with others, a man named [Patrick] Flynn was arrested. Sub-Constable Fitzgibbon, who made the discovery of the scrap of paper in the former case, having a keen eye to business, in looking over some numbers of the old *Hue and Cry*, came to the conclusion that Flynn answered to the description of a man wanted for shooting, a couple of years previously, a man named [Martin] Duignan. The widow and servant girl of Duignan, who were the only witnesses of the assassination, had left the district, but were traced, and found upwards of sixty miles away from the place where the murder took place, and were brought to Elphin. Flynn was placed amongst a number of others in the barrack yard, where the two witnesses identified him as the assassin. He was tried at the same Assizes, convicted, and executed, confessing his guilt on the scaffold in presence and hearing of a vast number of spectators.

I have already stated that Rector Lloyd was assassinated because he was too charitable, and this requires explanation. He was middle landlord of a couple of townlands near Elphin. He allowed arrears of rent to accumulate until from eight to

twelve years' arrears of rent were due. He was 'the life' of the lease, and the tenants came to the conclusion that if was put out of the way, arrears would be all wiped out, and they would come under the head landlord at their own conditions. Two pounds were scraped up amongst them. Donoghoe was hired to do the job for that amount, and the sequel is already told.

The subscribers were all discovered, arrested, convicted, and got from seven to fifteen years' penal servitude – I think to the number of about eighteen. The landlord became a stock farmer and reared bullocks instead of its former occupants.

Killing of a magistrate

Though Courtney does not mention him by name, in the following account he is in fact referring to Hubert Kelly Waldron, a magistrate who lived at 'Ashford', Drumsna, County Leitrim. Waldron owed money to George Church, who had recently received a court order to seize (distrain) Waldron's goods. On 22 January 1848, George Church and Thomas Phibbs Peyton, the Coroner, arrived at Waldron's home in the company of a large number of military and police, one of whom was Courtney. Church and Peyton were subsequently charged with manslaughter, but both were acquitted.

I will mention a case, I think the only one of the kind on record, and of which I was an eyewitness, as one of the party composing the police force present. A magistrate, and Justice of Quorom, now nameless, against whom there was a number of writs, defied all execution. He was known as the Molly Maguire Magistrate. On one occasion the sheriff, with a strong force of police and military, made a fruitless attempt to distrain, but were obliged to desist, as all his property and stock was inside an enclosed and secure yard, well guarded by Molly Maguires. On the following day the Coroner, who acted under some old Act of Parliament (which I cannot now quote), which gave him the power of forcing an entrance, made his appearance with a force of military and police. On the Coroner demanding admission, he was ordered by the magistrate, who with his son, quite a boy, was in the yard, and well armed, to be off or he would shoot him if he attempted to force entrance. The bailiffs were directed to force the gate, but were fired upon by the magistrate and his son, dangerously wounding some of the bailiffs and police. A few of the police were ordered to fire, and the magistrate fell,

being instantly killed. I need not say that the bodyguard of Mollies, so far from showing fight, showed a clean pair of heels, scrambling over the walls, and all made their escape. An entrance was then forced, and a seizure made. But all had to be given up afterwards, it being proven that the owner of the property was dead before the seizure was effected. The case was investigated at the following assizes at Roscommon, but the Grand Jury threw out all the bills. I visited that locality fifty years after the above occurrence, when I found the entire affair was only known by tradition. Nothing short of long history could give a detailed account of the occurrences of those distant times.

Postings to other stations, and settling in Belfast

I got transferred from Roscommon to County Leitrim in 1850. I may mention that I was one of a special parade for the Prince Consort, her late Majesty, and the present King – at the time a very small boy – in 1849. The parade was in the Constabulary Depot, Dublin, and the number on parade was 500, selected from different counties. The ordinary police duties continued, but not with so many exciting scenes as formerly. After serving in various stations, I was put in charge of that of Cloone in 1861, where I had to deal with the most uncultivated community I have met with. From that station all Molly Maguire dockets were issued, 'Dated at Cloone Gap'. It was there at that time the well-known Mrs. Cornwallis-West was brought up, being the daughter of Rector Fitzpatrick and Lady Olivia Taylor, daughter of the Marquis of Headford.[8] I was then sent in charge of Farnaght Station, established principally for the protection of the Earl Leitrim who was some short afterwards assassinated in County Donegal.[9] On August 6 1875, the day previous to the O'Connell Centenary, I was ordered to Dublin for medical inspection, and pronounced unfit for further service by Dr. [Eugene de] Clere, paid off and discharged on 20 September, after a service of 31 years.

Not wishing to settle in Connaught, I, with my family, came to Belfast, where I got appointed to a public situation under Belfast Town Council, in which I spent 19 years, making in all 50 years in public life. My health is yet good. I know none of the ills to which humanity is heir. I now await, with patience and resignation, a call – a final one – to another sphere. T.C.

A former head Constable responds to Courtney

In response to Courtney's piece, on 14 December 1906 the *Belfast Telegraph* published an article by Mr. Robert Irwin (1835-1911), a former Head Constable of the R.I.C., and a personal friend of Thomas Courtney for almost fifty years. Irwin was born in Carrick-on-Shannon, and settled in later life at 127 Great Victoria Street, Belfast. During the Famine, his father kept a grocery shop at Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, where 'a barricade was placed in front of the store, and a sentry was on duty inside to prevent a rush'. Irwin spoke at length about Sub-Constable Patrick (the Fox') Fitzgibbon, saying that he was 'a born detective' and a master of disguise when engaged in undercover work. Speaking of jurors who were fearful of delivering a guilty verdict against a Molly Maguire, Irwin recalled the case of a particularly irritated 'High Sheriff' (unnamed) who would 'place the jurymen on carts, take them to an extreme point of the county, and there make them alight, to get home as best they could'. But perhaps one of the most intriguing part of Irwin's article were his comments on those Mollies who were sentenced to transportation: 'On the expiration of their sentences, numbers of them became settlers and good citizens. As an instance, one named Reilly became an Alderman of Hobartstown, Tasmania. He returned home to the West, and after purchasing the estate of the learned judge who sentenced him, settled down there'.[10]

Though I cannot say for certain, Irwin's 'Reilly' may have referred to Philip O'Reilly, a shopkeeper based in Keshcarrigan, County Leitrim, who appeared at Carrick-on-Shannon Assizes in March 1846 charged with authoring and publishing the so-called 'Molly Maguire Manifesto' in June of the previous year. Having spent two years confined in Carrick-on-Shannon Gaol, on 12 March 1847 he was sentenced to seven years transportation to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). According to his transportation certificate ('CON33-1-93'), Philip O'Reilly was aged forty-one in 1847, which clearly means – if we presume his age was cited correctly – that he was born in 1806. The 'Reilly' mentioned in Irwin's piece opened and ran the 'Huon Outfitting Warehouse', a highly successful clothing retail business at 84 Murray Street, Hobart. Elected as Alderman of Hobart in 1854, he maintained this position until 1856, when he tendered his resignation and sailed back to Ireland on the 'Indian Queen', leaving his son Francis Philip O'Reilly (later an attorney at the Supreme Court of Melbourne) in charge of running the business. But it seems unlikely that Alderman O'Reilly 'settled' in Ireland, as he is frequently mentioned in Tasmanian newspaper reports from the early 1860s. According to his obituary, he remained an active member of the Hobart business community until he retired from the clothing business and settled at Launceston, near Hobart,

where he died on 26 July 1883. His obituary also states that he was born in County Cavan, and that he died in his eighty-fourth year, which would make his year of birth 1799.[11] Nevertheless, Irwin's allusion to a convicted Molly Maguire succeeding in life and business on foreign shores still makes interesting reading.

Courtney remembers attacks by Mollies

On Christmas Eve 1907, the *Belfast Telegraph* (page 7) published 'The Land War in the West: Famous Crimes Recalled; Belfast Man's Experiences', another revealing piece by Thomas Courtney. Apart from alluding again to the murder of Rev. John Lloyd, he recalls the assassination of Major Denis Mahon on 2 November 1847, near Strokestown, and the attempted murder of magistrate Horatio Lawder ('H. L.') on 21 November 1845, at Aghamore, County Roscommon. His description of the details surrounding the attempt on Lawder's life seem to be at variance with contemporary newspaper reports, though this is understandable given the lapse of time. Hugh ('Hugo') Kelly, a seasoned Molly, was arrested and imprisoned for eighteen months for this attack. On 17 October 1847, just one month after his release from gaol, Kelly and three accomplices went in search of guns at the home of Pat McGreevy, at Corryolus. During the raid, a gun battle broke out between Pat's son John and the four Mollies. John McGreevy, whom Courtney incorrectly refers to as 'M.G.' (John had a brother called Michael), was shot dead. Kelly escaped on a boat on the Shannon, but one of his accomplices, John Gannon, was mortally wounded, his body later recovered from the river. Hugh Kelly was arrested, as was John McDonagh, one of Kelly's comrades. Hugh Kelly was hanged in front of Carrick-on-Shannon Jail, on 3 April 1848.

Thomas Courtney, 'The Land War in the West ...', 24 December 1907

> The present state of anarchy recalls to my memory many outrages, of which I had a perfect knowledge, which occurred sixty-two years ago when I commenced duty in Hillstreet, County Roscommon, as a member of the constabulary.
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> The outrages at that time were of a different class to the present. They were perpetrated by the Molly Maguires, who traversed the country by night and day, taking up arms, turning up stock forms, swearing persons to do or not to do stipulated acts, digging graves for those who would not comply, putting notices of threats at the

empty graves, something like the following, which was generally nailed to a kind of very rude-looking cross: ‘Mr. – , be this crass if ye don’t let this lan to any wan that wants it at (so much as a rood) this your grave. We won’t come back’. A kind of imitation of a rude coffin with an attempt to make cross-bones and a skull was generally to be found at the bottom of the interesting document, and signed ‘Molly’. The same class of notice applied to any demand that might be made, but land and delivering up arms were the principal demands. Should the demand not be complied with, assassination was often the result of non-compliance.

In your issue of November last, I gave a very brief outline of some of those outrages – the assassination of Rector Lloyd, etc. An outrage almost as bad was the murder of Major Mahon, of Strokestown. He held very large property, and was one of the most extensive landlords in the county. He was shot when proceeding to Roscommon. He was instantly killed, as also the two horses which were part of his carriage. His coachman was uninjured. He was fired at from behind a stone ditch, and although his tenants were working in fields all round, no person could be found who knew anything of the affair. A number of arrests were made, but no conviction obtained. An attack was made on the house of H. L. [Horatio Lawder], of the sub-district of Hillstreet, by three men to take his arms. They met Mr. L. at his kitchen door, and made their demand. Mr. L. seized one of them, and was in the act of dragging him into the kitchen when one of his female servants shoved both out and closed the door. He then ran to the stable for a pitchfork, and the attacking party fled. Although a number labourers were about the house, none of them made any attempt to assist Mr. L. I and another policeman made our appearance, returning from Elphin a short time afterwards, when Mr. L. reported the case to us, pointing out the direction in which they went. We went in hot pursuit, got in sight of them when crossing a stock farm, but they got mixed with other parties, so we lost sight of them. One the party was afterwards identified by Mr. L., but he was at the time on trial for a murder, the facts of which I will briefly relate.

An attack was made on the house of a man named M. G. [this in fact refers to John McGreevy; Michael was his brother] in the townland of Curryolisk [Corryolus], near Carrick-on-Shannon, for arms, by three men. M. G. [John McGreevy] resisted, when he was shot dead. Another of M. G’s family fired on the attacking party, wounding

one of them. They then fled, carrying off the man, and got into a boat on the Shannon. The police in Carrick-on-Shannon were communicated with as speedily as possible. A boat arrived containing two men, one of whom made his escape, the other was arrested. On examination of the boat, three fingers were found it, and one of the oars and gunwale stained with blood. After dragging the Shannon a few days, the body was found, minus the three fingers, which were evidently cut off by a stroke from the oar when the unfortunate man got hold of the boat in his endeavour to get into it after being thrown into water.

Hugo [Hugh] Kelly was the name the prisoner who was tried, convicted of murder, executed. This occurred in '48. I attended his funeral, which was a very large one. There was only one chief mourner, his wife, who was drunk at the time. It was at the trial that Mr. L[awder], who was an excellent local magistrate, identified Hugo as one his assailants. The third man was never discovered.

On 27 May 1845, Mollies attempted to set fire to the thatched roof of Eslinbridge police station. Courtney takes up the story:

A serious conflict occurred between the police of Eslinbridge station, near Mohill, about the same time. The police got word that a party of 'Mollies' were raiding the country. The police very soon got into conflict with the 'Mollies', when a regular pitched battle ensued. The police consisted of the constable and two sub-constables. After an exchange of complimentary bullets and slugs for a length time, one of the Mollies fell dead, and one of the police, Sub-Constable Tighe, got badly wounded in the head and back with slugs. Affairs looked bad for the police, for one of them was wounded, their ammunition was almost exhausted, and the opposing force getting stronger, death began to stare them in the face. The two police carrying their wounded comrade made for the barrack, taking protection as best they could. Fortunately, the barrack orderly got to know the state of affairs. He locked the barrack door and ran to Mohill, and it being a fair day, a relieving force arrived with all speed, just in time, as all the ammunition was exhausted. The name of the constable was Chrystal. The wounded sub-constable was Tighe, who now lies in the churchyard of Carrick-on-Shannon with the slugs, if not in his body, in his coffin. I do not recollect the name of the other sub-constable. The name of the barrack orderly was Waters. The entire party

> was well rewarded, getting three chevrons each, the constable and senior sub-constable got special promotion, with a grant of money from the reward fund.

The following incident took place in County Roscommon on 26 March 1845. On that day six armed constables from Ballinfad police station were out on patrol when they encountered approximately fifty labourers digging up a field in the townland of Tullyvarran, the property of Charles Balwin. Though all of the labourers had in fact received permission from Baldwin to prepare the land for conacre, the constables (one of whom was Michael Chalk) did not believe them, and wrongly presumed they were Molly Maguires. While walking away from the scene, the police turned and opened fire, killing John Gevigan outright. Witnesses described the killing as 'cold-blooded murder'. Though Courtney states that the constables were charged with 'manslaughter', they were initially charged with murder, but this was later reduced to manslaughter. When appearing before Judge Thomas Langlois Lefroy, all six constables were 'honourably and deservedly acquitted':

> Another serious conflict took place at Ballinafad, near the town of Strokestown, in 1846 or 1847, when a very large gathering assembled to turn up a stock farm, none of them appearing with arms, it being in the daytime. Although an R.M., County Inspector, and a force of police were present they could not interfere, it being only a case of trespass. However, a leader, or general, had them organised in companies and sections, which he commanded by 'using military phrases and words of command'. One of the constables, M – C – [Michael Chalk] arrested him on the above charge, but he was immediately discharged by orders of the R.M., the constable protesting. However, the police and civilians subsequently got into a collision; shots were discharged at the police, and a regular melee followed. The police shot one of the crowd. At the coroner's inquest, as a matter of course, the police were found guilty of manslaughter to the number of eighteen, and committed for trial to the following assizes at Roscommon, where they were kept. The Grand Jury found no bills against them, and they were discharged, getting their full back pay, with almost six months' exemption from duty, reported at the expense the ratepayers. Constable C. [Chalk] who made the foregoing arrest, reported the entire affair to the Inspector General. He was directed to lodge an information [report]. A warrant was issued, the offender re-arrested, tried, convicted, getting a long term of penal service. M – C- [Michael

Chalk], the constable, got special promotion to Head Constable, and was transferred to Tipperary. I cannot say how the R.M. was dealt with.

Space would not contain the many incidents I could record of outrage. The Mollies had not their own way on many occasions, but they seldom made a second attack where they met resistance. I will just mention one of their minor acts. In passing through the country at night, a number of persons left their houses to where they were going. In the absence of the family, they visited the house of Mr. Simpson to search for arms. On being told that the arms were in the police barracks by the young woman, who was the only occupant at the time, excepting a child of about three years old, they pulled the turf fire out of the hearth, one of them taking her by the head, and another by the legs, to roast her behind the fire. She fell off in a faint. At the same time it was announced that Mr. Simpson was approaching, when they all fled. That young woman afterwards became my wife. She never recovered from that shock, which eventually brought her to an early grave.

I only mention a few of their acts, all of which occured within a few miles of Hillstreet, where I was stationed at the time.
T.C.

Courtney: the origins of the Molly Maguires

In the early 1900s, a spat between two Irish politicians, William O'Brien and Joseph Devlin ('Wee Joe'), saw a reawakening in the Press of the Molly Maguire name. When Devlin went on a fund-raising drive to the United States, he became so infatuated with the ideals of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a group often linked with the Mollies, that he became Grand Master of the AOH in Ireland in 1904, prompting O'Brien to conclude that Wee Joe belonged to a group of 'tin pikesmen and Molly Maguires'. When the case ended up being tried at a Dublin court, it inspired Courtney to pen the following article, an account of the origins of the Molly Maguires. It was published on page six of the *Belfast Telegraph* on 24 May 1909, under the heading 'Fifty Years of Public Life':

I have been much interested in a case lately tried in Dublin, which brought to my memory recollections of the old 'Molly Maguires', and I had almost forgotten that

such ever existed. When I was dealing with them, sixty-five years ago, they were plain ‘Molly Maguires’, a title derived from the house in which they were first organised in 1844. They were originally composed of three classes, viz., ‘Molly’s Chickens’, ‘Molly’s Men’, and ‘Molly’s Heroes’. The former were looked upon as the small fry, or useless party; the second, ‘Men’, the class best fit to turn up land, or do heavy jobs; and the third ‘Heroes’, the class of men best adapted for carrying out their behests, or, as it was termed, ‘Molly’s Law’, such as inflicting punishment, swearing persons do certain acts, firing shots into houses, or even taking life. I was under the impression that the famine which followed had done away with them. I know personally that a great many of them died of hunger. The leader of the Mollies, when on duty, wore a full-dress uniform, the pattern taken from the woman of the house where they were first organised. It consisted of a cloak (not military), a ‘shakers’ (an old black beaver hat extending about six inches in front of the face), and a long black veil, a good deal the worse for wear. On one occasion I got a good opportunity of seeing ‘Molly’ himself in full dress, under the following circumstances: With another sub-constable, one Sunday evening I went to a fruit garden at Hillstreet, Roscommon. On our way home, when nearing the entrance gate, we heard the command, ‘Fall in’. We at once knew it was the Mollies, and we ran into a plantation of young furze, where we were quite concealed, yet had a perfect view of the Mollies. They had just crossed the country, and were getting into the road, Molly himself was dressed as described, and armed with a blunderbuss and great long sword. His party appeared to be very insubordinate, as I heard one of them tell him he was ‘a d – sight a better Molly’ than the leader was. When properly arranged, he gave them the command to march, and off they went. They were all entire strangers. Had we been discovered, it is hard to say what the consequence might have been. It is certain we would have lost our side arms, and got a few marks which might have left us unrecognisable, if we got off so easy. My companion kept in shelter and concealed in the plantation to see where they were going, whilst I ran to the barrack, little over a quarter of mile distant, to apprise the constable and party, who turned out in pursuit with all speed. Although a country station, there was a mounted man attached at that time. He also got out and galloped in pursuit, but the Mollies got off. The police pursued them until they were seen landing from three boats on the County Leitrim side of the Shannon River. The police, having no boats, were quite powerless to do anything. The Mollies, who numbered something about thirty, got on the rising ground, fired a few shots, gave three cheers, and saluted

> the police, not in military, but in derisive style. The police, crestfallen, returned to barracks, and went to visit and report the outrages committed by the party, which were not a few, but none of them of a very serious nature. They had only obtained some arms and administered a few oaths. When carrying out their designs, they always 'swopped', that is, strangers were brought to carry out their object, and vice versa. No native of the locality took part in their acts during the day, but they did during the night, turning land and other malicious acts, and the Mollies boasted that if they were not paid for night work, they had a few days' wages levelling during the day what they had turned up during the night previous.

The following incident took place on 19 August 1845, at Clonteem Lodge, about one mile from Drumsna, County Leitrim, the property of the Marquis of Westmeath:

> I have never known any man whose land was turned up to be coerced to let it; neither have I known them to revisit any house where they had received opposition in carrying out their threats. A determined and successful attack was made on a lodge at Clonteem, occupied by the Marquis of Westmeath, and where he lived a good deal his time. He was in the habit of going to Carrick-on-Shannon almost every market day, and during his absence a raid was made on his lodge, and everything in the form of arms carried off. Only a lady, a few young children and female servants were in the house. The male servants took the precaution to be absent. It was fortunate the old Marquis was not to be had, as he would probably have been killed. He became so disgusted with the treatment he got amongst people to whom he was kind and considerate that he left the country, and, I believe, never revisited it. He at that time was over seventy years old.
>
> The Mollies were much disappointed in an attack made by them on a house in the townland of Eastersnow, near Croghan. As usual, they paid their visit at a time when the male members of the family were absent at the fair of Boyle, and the house was occupied by three young women, who took the precaution to have the doors well secured. They merely wanted the loan of a couple of guns for a short time. They were told to come when the men were at home. They attempted to force the doors, and failing to do so they commenced firing shots through the windows. The young women sent a few shots into the crowd, knocking some of them off their feet. Molly himself

was mounted on this occasion, but he fled, carrying two lying across the horse's back. All fled, pursued by two of the young women, who kept firing on them until they got too far off. I spent many nights in that house afterwards on protection duty, but I do not believe they were afterwards interfered with, but they had police protection as long I was in the locality.

To give details of even a few of the many cases I saw at that time would make this article too voluminous. I will only mention one in which a policeman acted with a good deal of pluck and determination. A sub-constable stationed in County Clare was home on leave at Tulsk, near Elphin, and when in the act shaving, was told that the Mollies were in a house a very short distance off. The only arms to be had was a pair of tongs, which he seized and ran to the house. On entering, he found the owner on his knees, with a book in his hand, and one of the Mollies pressing a pistol to his breast. The policeman used the tongs, knocking the Molly down, and the pistol out of his hand, which the policeman seized. The rest of the Molly party fled, but a few of them carried the mark of the tongs. But none stopped to make any resistance; all fled. Word was sent to the police at Tulsk, who very soon arrived and took charge of the prisoner. I cannot now say what punishment (if any) was inflicted, but the policeman was well rewarded, and got special promotion. His name, I think, was Cox. This occurred early in 1845, but these affairs taking place in or adjacent to the district I was stationed in, I became conversant with them. At that time there was no chance of getting a conviction in any Molly Maguire case. All charged with an offence of that class were acquitted. At the following assizes, however, the juries were composed of men taken from the Grand Jury list, who rid the country of a good many which the country could spare without great loss. T.C.

Thomas Courtney died on 20 February 1910. He was buried two days later at the City Cemetery, Belfast.[12]

[1] Scottish-born Duncan McGregor (1787-1881), an ex-military man, served as head of the Irish Constabulary from July 1838 until 1858.
[2] The caoine was a mournful wailing, usually performed by women at wakes.
[3] 'Poltroon', another word for coward.
[4] Ardleckna, situated between Hillstreet and Elphin, County Roscommon.

[5] The ‘disagreeable odour’ was caused by phytophthora infestans, an air-borne spore which devastated the potato crop.
[6] The coffin Courtney refers to was sometimes known as ‘the sliding coffin’.
[7] ‘Colfing’, cloth wadding used in the barrel of a gun.
[8] ‘Patsy’ Cornwallis-West (nee Fitzpatrick) was an Irish-born aristocrat who became a mistress of Edward VII.
[9] William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, was assassinated in Donegal on 2 April 1878.
[10] Robert Irwin, ‘Belfast Veteran’, Belfast Telegraph, 14.12.1906, p. 6.
[11] ‘Death of an Old Colonist’, *The Mercury* (Tasmania), 30.7.1883, p. 2. Article accessed via trove.nla.gov.au (accessed 15.5.2020).
[12] *Belfast Weekly News*, 26.2.1910, p. 3.